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THE FAMILY HEAD AMONG THE NKUNDO NEGROES
[HET FAMILIEHOOFD BIJ DE NKUNDO NEGERS]

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THE FAMILY HEAD AMONG THE NKUNDO NEGROES

The family among the Negroes is organized in a patriarchal fashion. The father is lord and master, not only over his children, but also over all of his descendents. The power over his daughters and daughters' children, however, escapes him through his selling them.

All important things were dealt with and settled by him. Thus, for instance, to speak of only the most important, if one of his sons or grandsons had to be helped to get a wife, then it was for him to decide whether or not it was time for that. It was he who negotiated over that transaction and finally decided about the purchase of the wife. If one of his children or grandchildren shot an animal, then it was brought to him, and the distribution was made according to his decision and under his supervision. If one of his children had difficulties with his wife, the matter was judged by him. If one of the wives of his children ray away, he went to look for her if the matter was of a serious nature. If he was not able to settle the matter, then it was up to him to decide if the return of the money must be demanded or whether the matter must be decided by means of arms.

To the end of his days, sickness and insanity notwithstanding, he remained the only lord and master, and nothing was dealt with without his knowledge and approval. He was honored and respected up to his last breath.

Law of Succession

The law of succession is very much alew in relation to the patriarchal fatherhood mentioned in our history. Here it was not, it is still not today, the oldest son who was considered, even when he was of age. At the death of the father, these full powers passed to his brother. The children [333] female as well as male -- of the deceased brother, even though they were older in years, called him father and also showed him all the honor attached to the title of father. All their disputes and matters of importance were brought to him and settled by him. At his death the powers of family government passed again to his younger brother, and so on until all of the brothers had died. At the death of the last one, all rights passed, not to the oldest, second, or third brother [among his sons?], but to the oldest son of

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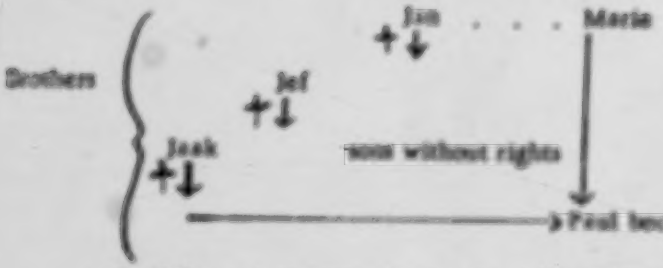
their sister, bana wa nkano. As an example:



Or if there were more sisters, the rights passed to the firstborn son of those sisters, for instance:

He consequently become the father and supreme head of the family upon the death of the three brothers.

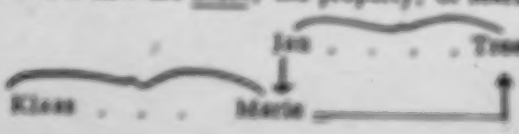
596 583 502 In order to understand this peculiar custom clearly, some explanations should be given. The custom in this country is that the women is sold; not a single one escaped that general rule in former days. With that money the father or brother bought, or rather, had to buy himself another woman. This wife belonged, however, to the daughter or sister who had been sold; the daughter or sister called her nkito, "goods" or "property." The children born of this nkito called her [the woman sold]: ia'a'omomo, "female father." Even if the brought male children into the world, the rights of their mother passed to them, and [334] their mother was called father by the children of the nkito. According to our ideas, they were only nephews. That held even if the woman was still not paid for; it was enough that a mbonga, a security as proof of further payment, had been given. It was also not

576 necessary for her father or brother to have brought her to the man and
573 to have received money for her; another member of the family was
56 sufficient. She was sold by her family and accordingly, whoever the money had remained or whoever had received it, she had her rights in the family. Since the family maintained itself through the sale of the children of the female sex, the male children born of them were considered as the members, the rightful claimants, the fathers. There was no exception to this rule; it was not to be altered, and no one had ever thought of disputing the place of the claimant or of laying claim to his rights. I have only heard of one single case of that sort, namely, at the succession of the Ruki, the younger brother was said to have killed his older brother in order to take over his place. He was said to have made a hole in his brother's nose, so that it sank when it reached the middle of the cranium. The matter in itself seems an impossibility; also I consider it a legend, unless an accident might have happened that was interpreted in a mistaken or deliberately false manner.

576 The rightful claimant, lomo wa nkoma, sister's son, might
577 still be a child; nevertheless he was called father and everyone vied with one another in showing him the honor due a father. That was the unbreakable law, not only for the father common to the hamlet, bokoi, but also for the father of each individual family.

Nkita

573 Nkita is what the woman is called who is bought with the money
602 that the father or brother has received for his daughter or sister on the occasion of her marriage. In reality, however, she is only the nkita, goods or property, of the said woman. Nkita ekom, "my property," this woman calls her. For instance, Jan [332] sells his daughter, Marie, to Klaas and buys another wife, Trees, with the money received. The latter woman is now the nkita, the property, of Marie.



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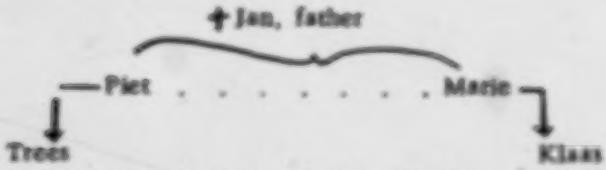
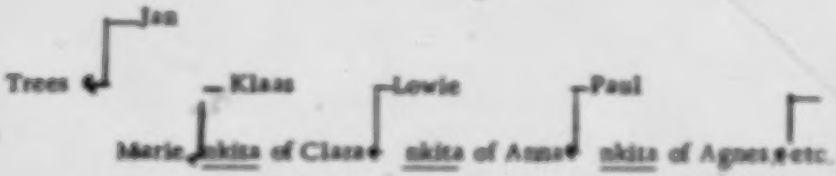
602 Or else, father Jan having died, Piet sold his sister, Marie, to Klaas and buys Trees with the money:



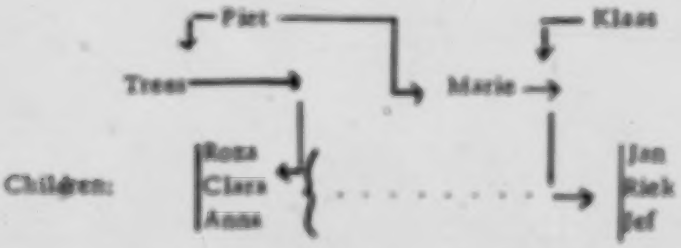
Practically speaking, Marie profited very little from her nkita. She had, it is true, certain rights over her nkita; thus, the latter considered her as her mistress, helped her in sickness and heavy work. Unfortunately for her, what she gained on the one side she lost again on the other side, in that she herself was also the nkita of another woman and consequently had the same obligations to fulfill towards the latter that her own nkita owed her. For example:



Jan, then, sold Marie to Klaas in order to buy Trees; Klaas, however, in order to be able to buy Marie, sold in turn his sister, Clara, to Lowie; Lowie acquired the necessary money to buy Clara by marrying off his sister, Anna. Thus, Trees then become the nkita of Marie, Marie the nkita of Clara, Clara of Anna, Anna of Agnes, etc. In short, every wife had her nkita and was, with few exceptions, the nkita of another wife. I say with few exceptions; for example, the wife was not the nkita of another woman if her husband had bought her with his own earned money. Practically speaking, this changed the matter very little. Also [336] there was no change if the nkita of a woman died; it was only a loss for the buyer or owner of that woman.

Rights of the Male Children in Relation to the Nkita of Their Mother

596 583 605 We have already seen that the right of succession and fatherhood passed to the male children of the sister, because she had been sold and had brought money into the family, or rather because she had a nkita there, a sort of guarantee for the money that had been received for her. Nkita-ship brought another right to them, namely, the female children born of the mother's nkita belonged to them: they could sell them and get themselves other women with the money. They could [583] not, however, marry them, since they were their cousins, and custom was opposed to any marriage between relatives. The boys could, [603] nevertheless, take the nkita of their mother as a wife, since the Negroes have no notion of affinity or relationship by marriage. The male children were, then, the owners of the female children that the nkita of their mother brought into the world:



These three girls, children of nkita Trees, belong to the three sons of Marie. If Marie had only one son, then Piet would have the right to trade the two other girls for money and to buy other wives with this money, either for himself or for his younger brother; but if she [Marie?] brought female children into the world, half of them belong to Marie's son.

583 604 If the nkita gave birth to no children of the female sex, the boys of Marie could resort to the husband of the nkita of their mother, namely, their uncle, nyangobika. If, however, he had no fortune, no money, [237] no wives, no girls to sell ... or only wives to whom others could lay claim and had more right, then they were disinherited, poor devils in society, and it cost them long years of work and much

583 searching for old disputes and old arguments about wives to get a wife.
604 And then they were still not always successful; their youth itself was
against them here and robbed them constantly of the little that they
464 had saved for that purpose. The means for getting money, such as
461 leaves, knives, arm and foot bands, were extremely scarce. The
Bloclo do not know of workers or servants, and if one of those poor
souls presented himself at the home of one who was better endowed by
fortune and offered to chop wood for him, to lay out a manioc field,
or to build a house for him, to gather straw and bamboo in the forest
for that purpose, then the inborn laziness of the Negro would require
long months to complete that work. As salary, the worker received
only a few bokonga (copper arm of leg bands); these he already owed
to the owner for having shown too much inclination for one or another of
589 his wives. The result of this was that many young men remained with-
595 out a wife and that those who were favored by chance, that is to say,
562 had many children of the female sex in their family, each had several
wives. I consider this a primary cause of polygyny. The woman had a
relatively high monetary value and represented capital. Thus, it did
not happen that anyone gave his daughter or sister to another for
nothing, just as among us it does not happen that a farmer gives his
cow or horse to a poor devil for nothing.

583 If the father or brother sold a daughter born of the nkita of his
604 daughter or sister -- a right that general custom gave him and which
683 usually occurred, since the children of the female sex were sold very
young and the boys, the rightful claimants or owners, in that case were
still very young -- this was done in order to buy another wife. The rights
of the children shifted then as follows:

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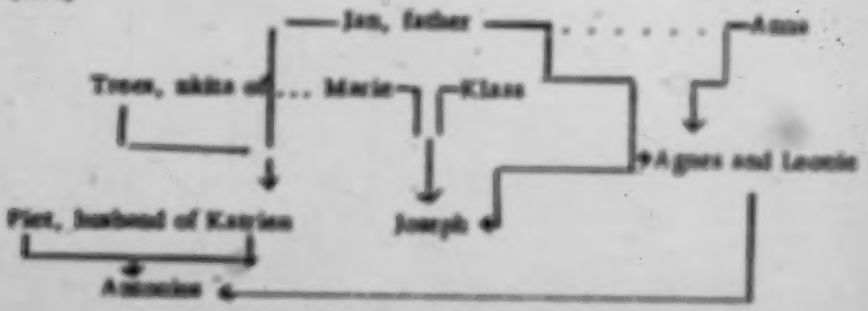

583 Jan, the father, by selling Katrien, the nkita of his daughter
604 Marie, becomes indebted to Joseph, the son of Marie and at the same
603 time his own grandson; and on the other side he becomes the debtor of Antonius, his other grandson, by selling his mother, Katrien.

Anna, whom he bought, was then the nkita of Katrien and the quasi-nkita of Marie. Both sons, Joseph and Antonius, were hard pressed because of Anna, the nkita of both of their mothers. If Anna bore two daughters, as I have indicated, the case was simple: the first daughter belonged to Joseph and the second to Antonius. If, however, she gave birth to only one daughter, then this child belonged to Joseph, and Antonius was left out in the cold. If father Jan had no children of the female sex by Anna, then the matter was extremely thorny for both of them, and if their grandfather or uncle possessed no money, had no more wives by whom he had daughters, there was nothing left for them to do but, at his death, to take the nkita of their mother as a wife. For this reason it happened many times that young men lived with old women, and even though there was then generally no more hope of children, those wives were then still good enough to cook the meals and do the little work that a Negro household requires.

000 I will not digress any further about the method of distribution of women, about the rights over the women which the nkita system brings with it. It would take us too far. Furthermore, not only the present, but also the past and the future are involved in it; so that one would have to be a Negro and raised in those matters to understand them clearly .... and even then they involve numerous palavers (disputes), which continually agitate the families and the villages.

[339] The Origin of the Nkita?

578 583 586 The sale of the woman and the immediate loss of her freedom must naturally have given her cause for revolt. It has perhaps cost the man a severe struggle to make the woman content with her lot. A compensation or reimbursement had to be given to her, and most certainly the nkita system has its origin there. It was at least a partial compensation that the man gave to the woman. It gave her rights over her nkita

576 and over the children who were born to the latter; even more, it gave
573 her own children rights which exist nowhere else in the world and prob-
562 ably among no other people: they became the superiors, the fathers of the family of their mother. Unfortunately, practically considered, the woman enjoyed very little of the gift which was given her; she remained what she was, slave of money, slave of the man. Even her children, for whom the ekita-ship secured such great advantages in her family, brought them into a false situation, in that it robbed them in the home of their own father of all the advantages that it brought them in the home of their mother's father. It was only the old and well-favored who actually gained advantage from the ekita system and enjoyed them.

1) It relieved them in the first place of all care on behalf of their daughters whom they sold while still children; and if later, after they were grown up, these daughters complained about the injustice done to them, they could answer them, "But, my dear daughter, I have done you no wrong; here in my own house is the woman whom I bought with your money; she belongs to you always, and the children that I have by her are your children; you are both their father and their mother; they will call you iwomumo (female father), and in that capacity they will honor and serve you; the boys will at the same time be the children of your children, and the girls will be sold to give your sons the opportunity to buy a wife for themselves."

2) It discharged them for the most part from all care of providing a wife for their son, and it denied the latter the right to make claims to the women whom the father preserved. [340] If the son begged his father for a woman, he could put him off and say to him, "But, my boy, you have the ekita of your mother; the children (girls) who will be born of her are for you. We shall sell them, and with the money we will buy you a wife." Most of these girls, however, were traded by the father for another wife, since his son was still, in that case, small. Almost all the women then ended up in the houses of the father before passing on to the son. Thus, after all, the ekita system only benefited the lust and the lasciviousness of the old Negro and made him the one and only master of the women. Sons, daughters, wives, and children were, in contrast, the dupes and victims of the ekita-ship.